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ABSTRACT

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, legal and sociopolitical sectors began to view children as a social group of their own, and European countries passed laws for the protection of children and introduced compulsory school attendance. This paper asserts that measures like these led to a far-reaching new definition of childhood on a macro-social level, which had numerous effects on children: laws and newly established institutions both cut children off from the world and imprisoned them in their own world in order to prepare them for "real life." Thus, children were decreasingly considered as their fathers' property (as had been the case centuries before) but were increasingly considered as property of the state. This paper examines what conception of childhood current European early childhood education and social politics are based on, and to what extent educational concepts react adequately to the current conception of childhood or what reforms are still required. The paper asserts that the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which considers children as subjects rather than objects, marks a decisive legal revision of the status of children that is of especially high quality. The paper examines various European countries' sociopolitical reactions to the Convention, and then discusses how after some initial restraint, early childhood education and educational research have started to react positively to these changes brought on by the Convention. Contains 34 references. (EV)

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CHILDHOOD IN EUROPE

Changes in Paradigms in Politics for Children and in Educational Research

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Children were not acknowledged as a social group of its own until the end of the Middle Ages. They were rather considered as their fathers' property, they were treated in terms of propriety right and not as independent legal subjects. In the Age of Enlightenment in the 18th century children were discovered as a social group with its own interests. Since then they were regarded as "designers of the future" of the enlightened society and as tomorrow's "riches and wealth". However, this emphasis on "future" and "progress" reduced children to representing a "not-yet-category" (Qvortrup, 1991) and a "not-yet-being" (Verhellen, 1994).

It was not before the end of the last and the beginning of this century that the legal and sociopolitical sector drew its conclusions from this changed view of children and childhood. A lot of European countries passed laws for the protection of children and compulsory school attendence was introduced. Measures like these led to a far-reaching new definition of childhood on a macro-social level, which had numerous effects on children: Laws and newly established institutions both cut children off from the world and imprisoned them in their own world in order to prepare them for "real life". Thus, children were decreasingly considered as their fathers' property, but they were increasingly considered as the property of the state. A process on the macro-social level aiming at an ideal future society, changed children

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into objects[1].

Under these premises, the 20th century started, which was to become the century of the child according to Ellen Key[2].

So this presentation is concerned with the question which conception of childhood current European early childhood education and social politics are based on and to what extent educational concepts react adequately to the current conception of childhood or which reforms are still required.

Our demographic, sociological and family psychological development is paralleled by a change in the child's status in national and international legal systems. I have already mentioned that at the beginning of this century a widespread interest in the question of children's rights has led to agreements relating to the law of nations, such as the Hague Convention on the guardianship of minors of 12 July 1902, or the International Convention for the Suppression of the Traffic in Women and Children of the Council of the League of Nations passed in Geneva on 30 September 1921. Children's rights in this century are inseperately bound up with Eglanyune Jebb, the founder of a movement for children's rights, who was arrested in 1920 because of her photographies, with which she tried to draw public attention to the problem of starving children after the end of World War I (Cohen, 1983, 1990). This movement not only led to founding the NGO called "Save the Children International Union" (SCIU), but the first declaration on the rights of the child was passed by the League of Nations Assembly in March, 1924, which become known as "Declaration of Geneva" (Bennett,

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1 Harten, H.-Ch: Kindheitsgeschichte als Utopiegeschichte. In DJI (Hrsg.), Was für Kinder. München: Kösel, 1993, 43-50.

2 At the end of this century it is high time to analyze the conception of childhood in the 20th century and to reflect which solutions we have already found for the changed needs and interest of children and for the newly defined legal status of the child in family and society in this century, or maybe we should reflect which problems are still unsettled.

1987; Cantwell, 1992). In the following years and especially immediately after World War II the International Community included a number of agreements (e.g. the "International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Political Rights" (Bennett, 1987), which were meant to guarantee the rights of "every human being", and thus also those of children. On 20th November 1989 the General Assembly of the United Nations passed the "Declaration on the Rights of the Child", which did not represent an amendment to that of 1924 and still regarded children as objects, i.e. not as independent legal entities. Besides, it was merely a declaration and not an agreement, i.e. it was not obliging for national legal systems[3].

In contrast to previous declarations in the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child (passed by the General Assembly of the United Nationa on 20 th November 1989) children were no longer considered as objects, but as subjects. Historically, it marks at least a decisive legal revision of the parent-child-relationship, because parental care and parental responsibility in general were no longer regarded as the only form of a socially accepted and legal regulation of the parent-child-relationship. Compared to previous legal systems the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child has an especially high quality, for it acknowledges the legal status of children to an unprecedented degree.

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3 The attempts of the U.N. to formulate a Convention on the Rights of the Child having the quality of a law for the ratifying states, were initiated by the Polish government. In 1978 the Polish government submitted a proposal to transform the "declaration on children's rights" into an "agreement on children's rights" with the status of a contract relating to the law of nations (DB-Drucksache 12/42, S. 31; cf. Limber & Flekoy, 1995). [The work initiated at the "Warsaw Conference on the legal protection of children" led to a draft of the Agreement on Children's Rights, which was put to the vote on 9th December 1988 and was unanimously accepted by the members of the work group.

Generally speaking, its regulations can be attributed to three levels which are meant to safeguard children's interests and rights: 1) provision, 2) protection and 3) participation of the child in all questions which concern children themselves. In the following years research literature treated more or less extensively the questions of children's right a) to care and provision b) to their identity and ethnic and cultural origin, c) to know their parents and to be looked after by them, d) to express their opinion and to participate in all questions concerning children themselves. Immediately after its ratification this agreement triggered off a lot of controversial debates, which were concerned more and more with educational questions and on which I will expand later on.

In European research the social status of childhood has been discussed for some time, partly simultaneously with this development, and partly as a consequence of it. This discussion has been accompanied by a number of research projects, conferences and publications. A common feature of all of these attempts is a revaluation of childhood within the social context and the aim to acknowledge children as a social group of its own. Accordingly, children are no longer defined as a "not-yet category", but as persons entitled to human rights of their own and as persons endowed with the ability of exerting these rights independently. In connection with the aspects of familial change the legal and social revaluation of childhood has decisively changed the contextual conditions of education .

Before I will discuss the emerging change of paradigms in educational research and the definition of educational quality, I should first like to comment on the resulting sociopolitical consequences.

Among the European countries Norway has a leading position as to respecting and representing children's rights. As a pioneer Norway not only appointed an ombudsman representing the interests of children, but has also established the first ministry for childhood (and family) in Europe. The

discussion on children's rights started in Germany at about the same time. In 1981 the German federal state of Nordrhein-Westfalen submitted the first government report on children and at the same time appointed the first commissioner for the protection of children. German Parliament (Deutscher Bundestag) has summoned the first parliamentary commission for children worldwide.

At the end of the Eighties and at the beginning of the Nineties a number of projects were initiated and some research institutions were established to accompany the enforcement of the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child and the European convention on the exercise of children's rights. To give an example, there is the Norwegian "Childwatch International Research Network" in Oslo, which as a NGO supervises the implementation of children's rights by developing criteria for evaluating the attempts of enforcing the U.N. Convention including children's opinions (Miljeteig, 1994).

The programme of politics for children of the European Council in Strasbourg supporting and promoting the role of children in family and society led to the passing of a European agreement ensuring children's rights. This document is meant to supplement the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child appropriately in the European context (Council of Europe, 1994). A conference in Madrid organized by the European Council in connection with the International Year of the Family dealt with the mechanisms of participation and negotiation in the family (Council of Europe, 1994). UNICEF has established a research centre in Florence concerned with developping children's rights and with implementing the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child (Flekkoy, 1993; Hart, 1992). Besides, I should like to mention the project "Childhood as a Social Phenomenon", which is implemented in Vienna under the direction of Jens Qvortrup from Denmark in cooperation with several countries. Its publications and conferences have invigorated the discussion on children's

rights in Europe.

Of the three levels of children's rights (provision, protection and participation) participation has become increasingly important at the end of this century. Norway once again has a leading role in this context, for in 1988 an innovative children's participation project called "Try Yourself" involving about 2000 children was initiated. This project aimed at supporting children to develop their own creative potential, to offer them opportunities to carry out tasks in a self-responsible way, to learn more about other children and their different cultures and to improve the environment, in which children grow up (cf. Flekkoy, 1993).

The Danish government has also initiated a two-year-project titled "Children Are Active citizens" in cooperation with five communities. In this project children were offered concrete possibilities of participation and of taking on responsibility in their communities. The project was meant to give children better chances of participating in activities, which they can shape themselves to a certain degree, and of expressing their opinions and views publically.

In the German-speaking countries for some years we have been witnessing a growing number of projects attempting to help children to participate in primarily communal decision-making-processes and experimenting with various forms of participation (cf. Schröder, 1995). In some German federal states (e.g. Schleswig-Holstein) the communal constitutions were changed so as to include children's participation rights.

Today, France is considered to be a model country concerning participation of children in Europe. When in 1989 the community of Schiltigheim near Strasbourg in Alsace established a children's and youth's council on the occasion of the International Year of the Child, it could build on structures which had already been developed in France during the years 1960 and 1980 and which are comparable to the widespread youth's councils you will

find today. With more than 700 communities actively putting the participation of children and adolescents into practice, it was already in 1993 that France provided the most comprehensive conception of participation of children and adolescents in Europe. An umbrella organization, the "Association Nationale des Conseils d'Enfants et de Jeunes" (ANACEJ) is in charge of the nationwide coordination and of the advancement of participation of children on all levels.

Drawing from the experiences gained in France, Italy has developed the immediate participation of (up to now only) adults in a hitherto unprecedented model. It will be observed with great interest, whether such thoughts will also influence children's participation. Arci Ragazzi has treated this question in some publications (1989, 1994) and has tried to document the existing approaches of children's participation. As to the content, children's work focusses on city planning and on school matters.

In Spain the idea of communal participation of children has been very successful and there are discussions on children's participation in school matters. Additionally, a program to make children's rights known to the public has been developed.

Meanwhile there are the first results on the effects of children's participation: Parents and children regarded the experiences made in Denmark as encouraging and positive. At the same time there is evidence of initial bureaucratic impediments, which were difficult to overcome for the children. In France systematic research was carried out for example by the IDEF in Paris (Rossini & Vulbeau, 1993). The work of Nathalie Rossini and Alain Vulbeau generally describes this movement in France and also gives a systematic representation and evaluation of the activities of 14 children's and youth's councils. Further, I should like to draw your attention to the work of Bacher & Wilk, who have not only provided a report on the living conditions of children in North Eastern Austria, but

have also tried to evaluate children's participation in school matters systematically with encouraging results.

In spite of these praiseworthy attempts it should not escape our attention that in Europe political action for children is still in its infancy. Topics concerning children's rights are often not treated as part of a policy for children, but as part of a policy concerned with (female) employment. The reasons for this are on the one hand officials saying that they are not responsible for these topics and on the other hand a general rejection of the children's rights movement. This dilemma is reflected in the work of the "Childcare Network" of the European Commission, in which the problem of daycare for young children is treated as part of the policy for female employment. On a national level there are also approaches of a policy for children in which children's perspectives are not at the centre of all considerations and which even almost entirely ignore children's perspectives. So to give an example, in Germany the legally ensured right of children to attend kindergarten has been introduced primarily as a measure to support pregnant women and to prevent abortion and not as children's right to education and development. Comparable measures could easily be added to this list.

In most European countries it was only by the amendment of family law that the children's right to being raised by both parents could be ensured. However, countries like Austria and Switzerland are still very reserved concerning such reforms, while in Germany a new child custody law has been passed in October 1997 and the child visitation right for both parents has been codified.

After some initial restraint early childhood education has started to react to the changes mentioned above. In traditional educational concepts we can repeatedly trace some approaches to respect children's interests and needs (e.g. in the conception of Reggio Emilia) and there are some scarce hints

to children's rights. However, the fact that children's rights are explicitly emphasized and that they have been transformed into a quality standard in education, must indeed be considered as the result of the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child. Today, all over Europe researchers are beginning to adapt educational concepts accordingly. The integration of handicapped children, the consideration of special needs of children from different cultural groups, the attention to children's rights, such as the right to play (cf. Guddemi, 1992), and attention to children's health, these are all issues considered more or less explicitly in recent educational concepts (such as that by Hartmann & Stoll (1996) for Austria). This adds a further dimension to the concern of quality. The recognition of children's rights is an indicator of an ongoing change of paradigms within early childhood education, which has been promoted from different point of views during the last years.

The reason for such a change in paradigms are as follows:

Simultaneously with the passing of the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child and immediately afterwards psychologists and educational researchers started a discussion about the consequences of such legal systems on our conception of childhood, about the quality of educational intervention and the educator-child-relationship. I think it is the first time in the history of education that legal aspects exert a decisive influence on the quality of education and take into account a social reality in which the parent-child-relationship has increasingly been defined in legal terms to an extent unknown before[4].

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[4] The journal "American Psychologist" has dealt with the effects of the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child on psychological research in its January edition in 1991 and its December edition in 1996. Some other articles reveal the consequences of this legal system on psychological and in a broader sense on educational research (cf. Levesque, 1996; Limber & Wilcox, 1996; Melton, 1996; Murphy-Berman, Levesque & Berman, 196; Weisz & Tomkins, 1996).

Early Childhood Education has dedicated its attention to this important topic (David, 1993; Schlene, 1992). The book titled "Children's Rights and Early Education" edited by Catha Nutbrown (1996) gives evidence of the changes the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child brought about. Early childhood education researchers begin to show higher interest in the consequences following from a stronger consideration of children's legal status and they begin to contribute to the discussion on the National Reports on the Implementation of the U.N. Convention[5].

The political decisions of the last 20 years have brought about a redistribution of the resources money, space and time, which has been detrimental to children. The "new poverty" resulting from it primarily affects children (Huston, 1997).

It was already in the Mid-Eighties that Sabine Lang (1985) has discussed the concept of "quality of life for children", which was used in the following years to try to identify the factors influencing children's subjective and objective well-being (cf. Nauck, 1993). In early childhood education this research tradition is continued by the works of Laevers (1994) and of the State Institute of Early Childhood Education in Munich (Ulich & Mayr, 1996). In recent years this approach has become very important for researchers trying to detect the factors, which contribute to impair or improve children's subjective well-being.

In the past, in all matters concerning children there was generally some kind

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[5] At the 4th EECERA conference in Göteborg in 1994 Deborah Phillips reviewed the results of the Carnegie Task Force Report titled "Starting Points: Meeting the Needs of Our Youngest Children" (1994) and pointed out that today, children's early years development increasingly meets with a social situation characterized by cuts in public expenditure for children and by parents' lack of time for their children.

of consensus to take a point of view, which was rather backward-oriented and focussed on problems and deficits. This applied as well to research as to politics for children. The underlying concept of vulnerability refers to an individuum's predisposition to develop different forms of psychopathologic or ineffective behaviour. It reflects the tendency to negative developmental results, which might occur under conditions of risk (Pellegrini, 1990; Werner, 1993; Zimmermann & Arunkumar, 1994). In contrast to that the concept of resilience is a model based on strengths instead of deficits and problems (Rutter, 1987). In addition to the consideration of risk factors and the documentation of detrimental effects on a healthy development this model also takes into account the conditions strenghtening the resilience of children and their families. If we are willing to learn from the children, who were successful in coping with difficult situations, we will receive valuable ideas for prevention measures in early years education and we will learn how to help children coping with family transitions, with developmental transition and with normative life events.

At present there is comprehensive research work supporting the attempts to shift the focus of attention from risk factors and from the etiology of maladjusted behaviour towards healthy reactions and reactions of adaptation in order to improve our understanding of stressful living conditions for children (Garmezy, Masten & Tellegren, 1984; Werner, 1993; cf. for a survey Zimmerman & Arunkumur, 1994). Yet there is still a lack of comprehensive information on the resilience of children (and their parents) and we require more information on how resilience develops and changes within the life cycle. Today, we need more urgently than ever before programms for children, which aim at strengthening children's resilience by alleviating the effects of risk factors, by emphasizing protective factors and by teaching them coping strategies for difficult situations. This concept provides the basis for a new trend in early childhood education focussing on the resilient child and the teaching of competence. Joseph (1994) has published an explicit support programme, which includes both theoretical

discussions and practical advice.

These and other approaches exemplify that there is a trend in modern early childhood education to dissociate oneself from the prevailing use of support programmes and turn to concepts of strenghtening children's competences. Thus, in new research studies on the quality of education the focus of interest shifts (once again) and children's characteristics and developmental scores are given more weight. The longitudinal study of the "National Institute of Mental Health and Human Development" (NICHD, 1996) represents a prototype of this development. It is the most extensive research project in the history of early childhood education carried out at ten different places in the United States with more than 12 universities participating in the project. The project's aim is to investigate the effects of early non-familial child care on children's development and on the quality of the parent-child-relationship.

However, a presentation of the preliminary results[6] pointed out that even recent concepts of quality can only account for a relatively small portion of the variance in children's development. The common aim of all of these attempts is to give more weight to defining children's characteristics and developmental scores as independent variables when evaluating early childhood education programmes than in previous years. This means that at present we are witnessing a process within early childhood education of abandoning the prevailing support programmes and substituting them by educational concepts training children's competences.

The results of a study on educational quality carried out predominantly in Europe, in which Germany, Portugal, Spain and the United States take part cannot yet be predicted. The first preliminary results were published at the

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6 "Biennial Meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development" on 4 April 1997 in Washington, D.C.

end of 1996 (Tietze et al., 1996). In Germany Jürgen Zimmer and I are preparing a manifesto about educational quality on behalf of the German ministry for education, science, technology and future. It is to be presented and discussed in a symposium this autumn. The manifesto is meant to provide a new conception on the education of preschool age children.

Another interesting approach draws on the results of family research and defines processes of change in children's development, in the family developmental process and in education as transitions, with which the child has to cope by individual processes of change, changes in the family system and by utilizing contextual conditions.

Thus, at present the transition approach serves to conceptualize the transition from family to kindergarten and from kindergarten to school (but also further transitions, such as the transition to vocational training and starting the first job). Children's developmental scores and variables of interaction are used for evaluating the success of these coping processes. So, as you can see, all of this opens up a totally new conceptualization of educational questions. At the moment we are doing research in this field at our institute (Niesel & Griebel, 1997).

All recent research literature concerned with children's rights should be appreciated as an encouraging indicator of a changed viewpoint within educational research and in the debates on educational quality, which started at the beginning of the Nineties.

Within the discussion on quality new aspects are gaining ground: First, the debate, which until now has merely focussed on structural aspects, such as the size of a group and the ratio of staff, has been enriched by a new interest in interactional and processual aspects. A great number of people have demanded a stronger recognition of the child and its needs and the focus of curriculums is being shifted from programme-oriented to child-

centered educational approaches.

I like to close my discussion here. I intended to draw your attention to recent developments in society on the whole, which early childhood education must not ignore and which will make it necessary for early childhood education to put some of its concepts to the test and ask whether they are still appropriate.

Former opinions expressing cultural pessimism and complaining the marginalization and isolation of childhood in catchphrases like "childhood is vaninishing", "childhood is being liquidated" and "the end of childhood" should be opposed by an approach which accepts childhood as a social entity and ackowledges children as a social group of its own within society. Conceding rights to children and respecting them should be a logical consequence of democratic actions. Recognizing children's quality of life as a prerequisite to ensure their subjective and objective well-being and to safeguard children's interests, is an important constituent of educational quality. This means that contextual factors have to be taken much more into account than before. Thus, I should like to recommend a stronger consideration of children's competences in education and I think that educational programmes should be estimated according to their capability of helping children to become resilient and cope sucessfully with normative and non-normative events in their lives. We require a new approach in early childhood education, which respects children to a higher extent than before, which makes the educational process more democratic and does not restrict the responsibilities of early childhood researchers to the institutional framework, but conceives the researcher as an advocate of the child in a rapidly changing society.

It will be essential to develop educational concepts supporting children to overcome their traditionally weak social position (for which some educational concepts also are partly responsible) and to encourage children's

independence in the light of a changed parent-child-relationship. In addition to educating children early childhood education has to perform a social and cultural task. It has to provide the necessary professional advice and support in political decision-making processes, which is required for the correct interpretation and implementation of the interests of the child.

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